

# 100 Years Ago in Mekeel's:

## The Olympic Games Issues of Greece

by C. A. Howes (*From Mekeel's Weekly, January 29, 1910 with images & Scott #s added*)



Sc. 118



Sc. 119



Sc. 121



Sc. 124



Sc. 125



Sc. 126



Sc. 128



Sc. 128



Sc. 185



Sc. 187 proof



Sc. 188



Sc. 189



Sc. 190



Sc. 194



Sc. 197



Sc. 192

To vary an old saying—"Of the making of commemorative issues there is no end"; but there is a great difference in the general interest they evoke. Some are cheap, unattractive, poorly executed and of obscure connections; others are handsome, beautifully produced and celebrate events of worldwide fame. To the latter class belong our own Columbian issue, the precursor of the deluge, whose exquisite miniatures of famous paintings representing scenes in the life of the great navigator have not been surpassed. In the same class are the two issues commemorating the revival of the Olympic games at Athens, and it is to these that this article is especially dedicated.

The Olympian games were the most famous of the four great national festivals of the Greeks. Their origin was lost in antiquity, but legend attributed their foundation to Hercules and other mythical characters. They were celebrated in the sanctuary of Zeus at Olympia every four years, and the period between two successive festivals came to be called an Olympiad, which was used to some extent for reckoning time. The first Olympiad began with the year 776 B.C., from which the official list of victors dates, and the name of the winner of the foot race

was often used to designate the Olympiad instead of the number. The games were at their height during the fifth and fourth centuries, when the contestants were of the best blood in Greece, but gradually became mere professional contests and were finally suppressed by the Emperor Theodosius in A.D. 394, on the ground that they were opposed to the interests of Christianity.

During the greater part of their existence the games were in charge of the Eleans, in whose territory Olympia was situated. Early in the year of the games envoys from Elis were sent throughout the Greek world to invite the States to join in honor to Olympian Zeus; and in this way what seems first to have been more of a local celebration soon grew to be a national festival. The crowd of spectators included representatives of all branches of the Greek race, and many barbarians were drawn by the reputation of the spectacle. The competitions were open only to those of Greek descent and of good character. All combatants were required to train faithfully for ten months before the games, while the

last thirty days had to be spent at Elis under the eyes of the officials, or *Hellenodikai*, in charge.

The first day of the festival was given to sacrifices, especially to Zeus, while the officials and contestants took a solemn oath, the former to judge fairly, the latter that they had observed the required training and would compete with fairness. The 5 drachma stamp of 1906 [Sc. 197] illustrates this ceremony, where we see an altar with attending priest, contestants, and a winged figure of victory. On the 10 lepta of the same issue [Sc. 188] we see another figure of victory sitting upon an amphora, and holding what appears to be the caduceus of Mercury. This would be appropriate, as the messenger of Zeus also presided over wrestling and other gymnastic exercises, and everything, in fact, which required skill and dexterity. As amphorae were commonly used to hold wine, the overturned vase and the decoration of the vine in the corners above may serve as a hint that victory depended upon total abstinence. The 40 lepta of the 1906 set [Sc. 192] has another female figure holding a cock as an emblem of victory. This is described officially as a "demon des jeux," I believe, which has unfortunately been translated usually as a demon or devil of some kind. Any one who remembers his Greek will doubtless see at once that it is intended to be the "spirit of the games," *daimon* having that significance originally and only gaining its malevolent character in later centuries.

According to the accepted belief, the earliest and for long the only contest was the *stadion* or short foot race. In Olympiad 14 (B.C. 724) the race of two *stadia* was introduced, and at the next celebration the long run. The length of the course was some 600 feet, and the long run is understood to have been twelve times over the double course, making nearly a three-mile run. The 1, 2, and 3 drachma stamps of 1906 [Sc. 194-196] shows the runners, taken from an ancient tile. When the long run was introduced the runners abandoned the loin cloth and appeared naked, a custom which prevailed thereafter as shown on the stamp.

In B.C. 708 wrestling was introduced, and on the 30 lepta of 1906 [Sc. 191] we see a couple thus engaged. The object was to throw the antagonist three times, but the struggle was not continued on the ground. In B.C. 688 boxing was taken up, and the 1 lepton and 2 lepta of 1896 [Sc. 117, 118] shows the beginning of a bout. This contest became gradually more brutal, for while at first the pugilists wound straps of soft leather over the fingers as a shield and to deaden the blows, in later times hard leather, sometimes weighted, was used. Still the highest praise was won by athletes who owed their success to such perfect defense that they exhausted their opponents without striking a blow or receiving a scratch.

In B.C. 680 the race for the four-horse chariots was established, a quadriga being shown on the 25 and 60 lepta stamps of the 1896 issue [Sc. 122, 124]. These races were run in the hippodrome, of which no trace has been discovered, but which is said to have had a length of four *stadia*. This would mean that a complete circuit was nearly a mile, and it is said that four horse chariots made twelve circuits.

From this it would seem that the race was more for endurance than for speed, which was probably not the case. There is doubtless some discrepancy in the figures handed down to us.

Both series of stamps show us one of the minor games, discus or quoit-throwing. The discus was a plate of bronze, probably lens-shaped, and much heavier, evidently than the one now in use in athletic sports (4-1/2 pounds) as the best throw recorded is 95 feet. The 1 and 2 lepta of the 1906 set [Sc. 184-185] show Apollo throwing the discus, a design said to have been taken from an ancient silver coin of the island of Ceos, which was current some five hundred years before Christ. The 5 and 10 lepta of 1896 [Sc. 119-120] reproduce the famous statue of the *discobolus* or discus-thrower, which was executed in bronze by the Athenian sculptor Myron in the fifth century before Christ. It is known

by several marble copies, one of which is in the Vatican. The statue represents the athlete at the moment of the greatest muscular tension, when, having swung the discus back to the full stretch of his arm, he is about to hurl it forward with all his strength.

It is perhaps wholly natural that Hercules, the reputed founder of the games and the unconquerable "strong man" of the Greeks, should find a place on these issues. Two incidents from his remarkable career are represented, taken from some ancient ceramics. On the 20 and 50 lepta of 1906 [Sc. 189, 193] we find Atlas bringing the apples of the Hesperides to Hercules.

The story runs thus: The golden apple which Juno had received at her wedding from the goddess of the Earth had been intrusted to the keeping of the three daughters of Hesperis assisted by a watchful dragon. As one of his twelve labors, Hercules was ordered to get these, but it seemed the most difficult of all as he did not know where to find them. After various adventures Hercules arrived at Mt. Atlas in Africa. Atlas was one of the Titans who had warred against the gods, and when the latter had subdued them Atlas was punished by being compelled to bear the weight of the heavens on his shoulders. He was the father of the Hesperides and Hercules thought if anyone could find the apples it would be he. But if Atlas went, what about the heavens while he was gone? Hercules solved it by taking the burden on his own shoulders, as we see by the stamp, where he is upholding the moon and stars. Atlas is very kindly returning with the apples, and was good enough to take up his burden again, though somewhat reluctantly.

The 25 lepta of 1906 [Sc. 190] shows the encounter between Hercules and Antaeus. The latter was a mighty giant and wrestler, whose strength was invincible as long as he remained in contact with the ground, for he was a son of Terra, the Earth. He compelled all strangers who came to his country to wrestle with him on condition that if conquered (as they all were) they should be put to death. Hercules encountered him, as shown on the stamp, and finding it was of no avail to throw him, for he always rose with renewed strength from every fall, he lifted him up from the earth and strangled him in the air.

On two stamps of the 1896 issue we have representations of two famous statues of antiquity. It may be wondered why these should grace a set that commemorates athletic contests, but the connection is not too distant. The 2 drachma stamp [Sc. 126] has a picture of the statue of Hermes by Praxiteles, one of the greatest of Greek sculptors. The god is shown leaning his left arm upon a stump and supporting with it the infant Bacchus. The uplifted right hand carries a bunch of grapes toward which the baby god of wine is reaching. It will be remembered that Hermes presided over gymnastic exercises and sports which required skill, and we need but to add that the statue in question was located in the temple of Hera at Olympia to show why it appears here.

On the 5 drachma stamp [Sc. 127] is the statue of Nike or Victory by Paeonius, another celebrated Greek sculptor. This represents the winged goddess as sweeping through the air, with drapery pressed to her form and streaming behind in the wind. The statue was located within the enclosure that surrounded the temples at Olympia, and was conspicuous among many statues of victors and votive offerings. Early in the sixth century of our era the temples at Olympia were overthrown by earthquakes, and inundations buried the site under gravel. Not until 1875 was any determined move made toward excavation, but the German government then assisted the enterprise and these two statues were among the treasures recovered. The Nike was found in 1875, in a much damaged condition, and the Hermes in 1877, minus the right forearm and the two legs below the knees.

The 1 drachma stamp of 1896 [Sc. 125] is of interest as showing the Stadion or Stadium where the inauguration of the re-established

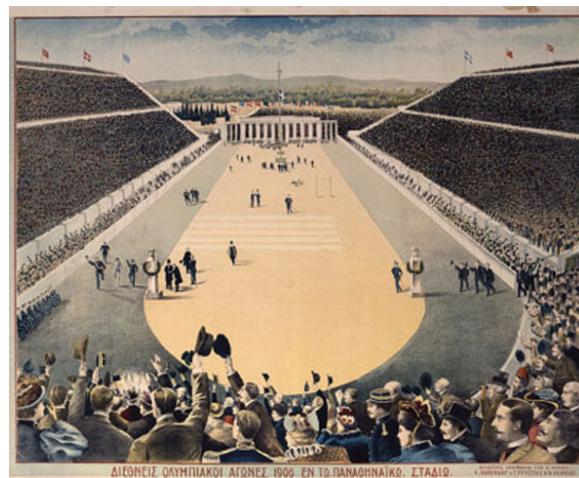
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Olympian games took place. The original structure, laid out in a hollow between low parallel hills, is said to have been built by Lycurgus about B.C. 330, but was rebuilt by Herodes Atticus about A.D. 130 in white marble. Most of this structure was burned for lime during the Middle Ages, but when the first games in the modern series were held at Athens in 1896, the ancient site was refitted, in part with marble, by the patriotic munificence of M. George Averoff, a wealthy Greek of Alexandria, together with the efforts of the Greek National Committee. The ground enclosed by the seats is 670 feet long by 109 feet wide.

In the background is seen the Acropolis of the ancient city, and the 1896 10 drachma [Sc. 128] gives an idea of it restored from a nearer point of view. The Acropolis, as we all know, was the religious center of the ancient city and was given up to temples and shrines. It was destroyed by the Persians in B.C. 480.

The 20 and 40 lepta of the 1896 issue [Sc. 121, 123] give a picture of an ancient amphora ornamented with a representation of Minerva, or rather Pallas Athene, to give her Greek name, the patron goddess of Athens, for whom the city was named. She is the goddess of wisdom, though represented in rather warlike garb, with shield, spear and helmet.

Several of the stamps bear palm branches and wreaths as tokens of victory. The wreath or crown of olive from the sacred tree, supposed to have been planted by Hercules, was the only prize anciently awarded the victors. They assembled for the prize in front of the temple of Zeus on the last day of the festival and were afterwards banqueted by the State of Elis. The victor returned home in triumph to enter the city in a chariot accompanied by processions and songs. He was rewarded



A poster created for the 1906 Olympics showing the Panathenaic Stadium and a capacity crowd watching the events.

with particular honors by his fellow-citizens and often lived thereafter at public expense.

The modern Olympic games, re-established at Athens in 1896, are for the most part open to the world. The second Olympiad was held at Paris in 1900, the third at the St. Louis Exposition in 1904, a ten-year renewal at Athens in 1906, and the regular one again at London in 1908. But so far Greece, and with reason, has been the only country to celebrate in philatelic form.